



# The Hidden Disability



by Richard Daniel Abel

Steven has trouble understanding what he reads and writes. He forgets names, can't follow conversations and is confused by written instructions. He can't think logically in an intense discussion and often hears words incorrectly, such as in "I ran to the car," instead of "I rented the car." Sometimes his classmates think it's funny, but more often the results are frustrating. Steven has a learning disability.

Steven is not alone as learning disabilities are not uncommon. They do not automatically bring low achievement and a lack of self-esteem, as shown by the large number of celebrities that probably had them. For example, Albert Einstein would have most likely have been a learning disabled child, as Einstein did not start reading until he was nine years old.

"I remember I used to never be able to get along at school," said a young Thomas Edison, "I was always at the foot of my class . . . my father thought I was stupid, and I almost decided that I was a dunce." Today, Edison would be diagnosed as dyslexic.

Many other public figures can be described as learning disabled. A partial list would include millionaire Nelson Rockefeller, author Hans Christian Andersen, U.S. president Woodrow Wilson, artist Auguste Rodin, U.S. general George Patton, television producer Stephen Cannell, actor Tom Cruise and inventor Leonardo da Vinci.

There are many types of learning disabilities. Over the past two decades, learning disabled people have been referred to as having attention deficit disorders, dyslexia, hyperactivity, hyperkinesis, minimal brain damage and minimal cerebral dysfunctions. Most learning disabled students were placed in a small classroom with others like them, while others were left alone and not educated. Some of these students were regarded as mentally handicapped.

Starting in the late 1960s, there was more of an effort to integrate learning disabled students into society. But, before reaching this point, many steps had to be taken.

Before a child could be considered learning disabled, school boards had to create a definition of a learning disability. In 1964, Toronto started looking at defining the term.

In the U.S., a definition of learning disabled was created and written into a federal law in 1977. The definition is as follows:

#### Part One

"Specific[ally,] learning disability means a disorder

in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language — spoken or written — which may manifest itself in [an] imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia and development aphasia. The term does not include children who have learning problems which are primarily the result of visual, hearing or motor handicaps or mental retardation, of emotional disturbance or of environmental, cultural or economic disadvantage."

#### Part Two

"A student is considered learning disabled if: (1) the student does not achieve at the proper age and ability levels in one or more of several specific areas, when provided with appropriate learning experience and (2) there is a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability in one or more of the following areas: a) oral expression b) listening comprehension c) written expression d) basic reading skill e) reading comprehension f) mathematical calculation and g) mathematical reasoning."

Unfortunately, this definition has some problems. It does not define the causes of learning disabilities. It also displays a certain discrepancy with regard to the definitions; it does not define what an "appropriate learning experience" is.

After many years of debate, a definition of a learning disability was finally agreed upon in Ontario. The Ontario Ministry of Education defines learning disabilities as "disorders in one or more of the processes involved in understanding or using symbols or spoken language. The disorders result in a significant discrepancy between academic achievement and assessed intellectual ability, with deficits in at least one of the following areas: receptive language, language processing, expressive language or mathematical computation. Such deficits become evident in both academic and social situations."

Even though a definition was given by the Ontario Ministry of Education in 1977, each school board was left to decide what to do about learning disabled students in their classrooms. Dr. Birute Jonys, the chief psychologist at the North York Board of Education, classifies students' learning disabilities in two ways: through educational and psychological assessment. Jonys explained that learning disabilities can be divided into five categories: visual, auditory, motor, organizational and conceptual.

In the early 1980s, *Education Act Bill 82* was introduced to establish a five-year plan. Starting in September 1985, the *Education Act* guaranteed that . . . all exceptional children in Ontario have available to them . . . appropriate special education programmes and special education services without payment of fees by parents . . . Under this Act, all Ontario boards of education had to provide education for all learning disabled students. But, there was one drawback.

"Some boards got around the learning disabled child," said Audrey Watts of the Ontario Learning Disabilities Association. Many boards did not provide services for learning disabled children, she added, because they never even completed assessments of the students' abilities. One of the first Ontario boards of education to start identifying students with special educational needs was North York.

Jonys explained that the identification, placement and review of special education students is quite involved. To make the process simple, Jonys designed a chart explaining the identification, placement and review of exceptional students. She estimated that it cost up to \$2,000 just to have a psychological assessment done on a child with a learning disability.

Although generally regarded as objective, testing has not gone without criticism. Dr. Lynne Beal, a senior psychologist with the Toronto Board of Education, said, "Some critics have suggested the tests, [most of which are designed in the United States.] are unfair to Canadian children" because of the cultural differences in them contain.

Dr. Marc Wilchesky, co-ordinator of the learning disabilities programme at York, agreed that testing many not be perfect. According to Wilchesky, the testing for learning disabilities may be correct at the time it is done, but one can never tell what will happen in the future. One of the things that cannot be tested is the way the individual copes with learning a new skill. Wilchesky feels this is a very important factor to look at. But the most important thing that no test can evaluate is personal motivation. Wilchesky explained that the learning disabled student, who does not have the motivation to succeed, will not end up completing a goal.

For some, it is questionable whether any test can be designed to accurately measure the potential of a learning disabled student. The use of test scores is not a guarantee of efficiency and objectivity. Many of the testing techniques must be improved. One proposal from both Watts and Wilchesky is to find the strengths and weakness of the learning disabled student. After finding strengths, they can be used to

overcome the weaknesses.

Providing support is one of the most important things that must be done for any learning disabled student and the support must come from the home and from teachers. Teachers must be able to help the learning disabled student as much as possible, for example, the learning disabled students may have to work outside the classroom and be given extra help coping with school work.

The extra support given at school would require an increased amount of funding given to a board by the Ontario Ministry of Education. However, the Ministry currently provides the same funding for each student whether or not he or she is learning disabled. This money must cover the cost of assessing the child in the beginning right to paying the teacher who works with him or her.

If a learning disabled student enrolls in university, he or she is faced with many new and difficult challenges. Wilchesky explained that the learning disabilities programmes at York, part of the Counseling and Development Centre chaired by Dr. Harold Minden, provides support to university students in order to facilitate their academic, personal, social and career development, to identify learning disabled students who have the abilities to succeed at university, to determine any special needs and to provide information to secondary schools, community colleges and other universities.

However, the student must be willing to accept all this help. The most important thing that a learning disabled student must do is to educate others about his or her special needs.

Looking back, learning disabled students were once considered mentally handicapped. As time went on, the research of learning disabilities improved. Support in the school system now begins at grade one and continues through university. Wilchesky believes support should not stop at the university level but should continue into adulthood.

Even though the system has changed for the better, it can still be improved. A lot depends on advances in understanding this phenomenon through further research. Research has advanced our understanding up to now and the effort should continue.

York University provides its official policy in a pamphlet about the learning disabilities programme: "Students with learning disabilities often develop unique ways of learning effectively, yet they share the FRUSTRATION of coping with a disability that is invisible, and thus often misunderstood. A learning disability is NOT a form of mental retardation, emotional disturbance or laziness. It is a weakness in the processing system to be considered along with the strengths and talents of each individual.